

Digging around in the undergrowth of schools reform in England

Warwick Mansell's news and analysis site

# Long-awaited curriculum review at three former Steiner free schools effectively kills off the educational approach on which they were founded

14 May 2020

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[Avant Schools Trust](#)

[Steiner academies](#)



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Parents who told an academy trust's curriculum review that they favoured a radically alternative approach to schooling - including a delayed start to formal education for their children - have now effectively been informed that they cannot have it.

The curriculum review commissioned by a trust which has taken over three former Steiner free schools in the West Country appears to have helped killed off the Waldorf

Three schools in the West Country appear to have depended on the Waldorf arrangements on which they were founded, and which parents opted for when the institutions were set up.

The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, which supports Steiner schools in the UK and Ireland, has now written to Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, warning that the lives of the parents and children involved have been “turned upside down” and urging him to explain why the government had, it said, now removed from them the choice of this approach.

The development seems to have profound implications for how the government’s alleged drive to promote “diversity” in the English state education system is viewed, as I write in a separate piece [here](#).

## The details

The curriculum [review](#) related to three free schools which were set up in 2012-14 to operate a Steiner Waldorf approach to education within the state-funded sector.

Alongside a thriving Steiner academy in Hereford, the three free schools operated alongside a larger number of long-established private Steiner schools.

However, the continuation of the Steiner ethos has been in question at the free schools since all three failed Ofsted inspections ordered by the chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, in autumn 2018.

Following the inspections, which had highlighted safeguarding problems as well as what were characterised as low results – though the inspectorate’s judgments remain controversial with some of the school’s parents - the government decided to transfer all three schools to another academy trust, called Avanti Schools. The transfers happened on November 1<sup>st</sup> last year.

Avanti, which until then had operated only Hindu-ethos academies including free schools, committed to undertaking a review of the curriculum at the three former Steiner institutions, in Bristol, Exeter and Frome in Somerset. This review was seemingly central to determining the extent to which Steiner “principles” were to be retained in the schools, under the control of the new trust.

## The findings

The review report, the conclusions of most of which have been accepted by Avanti’s board and are therefore to be implemented, documents a string of preferences by parents at the three schools which appear to have been rejected.

Steiner schools adopt a radically different approach to education, including the delaying of formal teaching to the age of six. There is no formal reading instruction in the early years – so no phonics - and no testing in key stage 1; no technology used in early education and a range of other departures from mainstream state provision, from an emphasis on singing in class to the presence of what is termed kindergarten, rather than reception and year one, and which is billed as offering a relaxed “home from home” approach. Supporters highlight the schools’ focus on creativity, spirituality, allowing children to be children and an absence of stress.

## What did the review report say parents at these schools wanted?

The review report documents the views of parents at each of the three former Steiner free schools: Avanti Hall in Exeter, Avanti Park in Frome and Avanti Gardens in Bristol.

The report itself then sets out what seem strong preferences by parents for decidedly

alternative approaches to mainstream English education which, as the review also admits, had been why they had chosen these schools for their children.

On a **delay to formality**, the review reports that Avanti Hall parents “indicated their strong preference for ‘a delayed start to formal teaching’”; at Avanti Park, where “parents shared a strong desire for a pure-Steiner curriculum”, “delayed formal learning” was among the aspects felt to be “key in curriculum design”, while at Avanti Gardens, “parents were keen that there should be a delay to formal learning”.

On reading, the review report said that, across all three schools, “we noted, from many parents, a dislike for **phonics** because it is perceived to discourage reading for pleasure”.

On **children not being subject to statutory testing**, at Avanti Hall parents “felt strongly that the school should be exempt from statutory testing, particularly in the early years”; at Avanti Park, parents “felt strongly that the school should be exempt from statutory testing”; and at Avanti Gardens, parents warned that children “should not feel tested”. Parents were generally sceptical even about non-statutory, informal in-class assessment.

Steiner schools are **non-uniform**, and there appeared a strong preference among parents at all three schools for this policy to continue.

The review also states that, at two of the three schools – Avanti Hall and Avanti Gardens, although it may be that parents at Avanti Park were of the same view; there was no statement either way – parents wanted the practice of **children calling their teachers by their first names** to continue.

The review also documents that parents at the three schools were **not in favour of much screen use**: those at Avanti Hall “indicated that they would prefer either no screens or the use of technology to be delayed”; those at Avanti Park wanted “no screens in the kindergarten” and “little or no technology before the age of 11”; while, at Avanti Gardens, “some parents felt that screen use should be minimal”.

In some places, as it sets out the views of parents, the review report appears to contrast them with what some children might prefer.

For example, at Avanti Hall, while their parents favoured minimal screen time, “children indicated that they would like more opportunities to learn about IT and to work on computers,” and “some children...would like a uniform”.

At Avanti Park, “children were keen for more ICT lessons and access to...laptops”, although in this case the review report admitted that “a large number of children were...keen that school uniform should not be introduced”.

At Avanti Gardens, “children...wanted more opportunities to use laptops for research and to learn coding skills”, while among their requests were for “more phonics”.

There is not strong evidence, though, that this indicated a major difference of philosophy between the two generations, or that children overall were unhappy with the alternative Steiner approach: the section on Avanti Gardens, for instance, states that children valued “time spent in the garden, having picnics and playing in trees”.

## **The conclusions of the report and of Avanti’s board**

On each of the above parental preferences, the outcome of the review process, which led to recommendations to the Avanti board and then conclusions on the way forward by the latter, is that the parental view has not been endorsed, with most of the report’s conclusions on the aspects of education set out above representing a rejection of parents’ choices.

On the delayed start to formal learning, in their previous incarnations as Steiner free schools, the three institutions had exemptions from the government's early years foundation stage. This meant that there did not need, for example, to be formal phonics teaching, and there was no testing in the early years.

It is understood that these exemptions did not feature in funding agreements governing how the three schools were to operate when they transferred to Avanti, and signed following private discussions between Avanti and the Department for Education. But parents remained hopeful that the approach might still apply.

Those hopes have now been crushed, however.

In its section on whether the schools should follow the national curriculum and "**age related expectations**", the review concluded: "We noted concerns [from parents] that the National Curriculum could produce a narrow educational experience.

"However, as state-funded schools, there is a national expectation that children reach 'age-related goals', in primary school particularly, related to core English and Maths skills and knowledge...

"We noted concern about the perceived rapid process of the teaching of reading, writing and maths, and concern about age-appropriate learning. We could not identify robust evidence-informed clarity about what 'age-appropriate' learning was. However, we have seen the National Curriculum implemented in creative ways, and suggest that high standards in reading, writing and maths do not need to oppose high-quality creative, outdoor and experiential learning...

"We propose that the National Curriculum expectations are adopted because schools are judged on that basis."

So, on whether there should be a **delayed start to learning**, and on **statutory testing**, the report conceded that: "Globally, we understand that there are many high-performing jurisdictions where children have a later school starting age than the UK."

It then, however, dismissed this debate in a single sentence, saying only that: "Such policies are contextually situated in different cultures and political systems."

It then added: "Whilst we acknowledge the value of ongoing educational debates around the optimal age for children to begin formal learning, as part of funding agreements with government [though as mentioned above, not the original funding agreements on which these schools were set up and based on which parents opted for them for their children], schools in England are regardless required to follow statutory assessments such as the Early Learning Goals in Reception and the Phonics Check in Year 1."

It then added, in a caveat which might be reassuring to many English parents but seemingly not those which had wanted a specifically Steiner approach to this issue, that "a well-planned curriculum accompanied by skilful teaching brings alive learning...as well as reaching government expectations".

It added: "Parents wanted the reintroduction of the EYFS exemptions for Phonics Check and Early Years assessments. Given the low standards identified [though disputed by some parents] by Ofsted, it a matter for the Trust to consider whether the Department for Education would be open to receive an application to exempt schools from national assessments."

On **phonics** the review concluded in favour of "a balance of high-quality phonics teaching

On **phonics**, the review concluded in favour of “a balance of high quality phonics teaching and the development of engaging reading for pleasure cultures”. (As set out in a piece last month on this website, phonics was not taught at all in the early years before the Ofsted inspections, so again this is a rejection of the specifically Steiner approach).

On **in-class assessment**, the review conceded that “there is concern [among parents] that assessments could damage the learning experience for children and result in stressed children”. But it added: “Assessment is a key feature of teaching and learning...testing in primary school does not need to be oppressive or stressful if a culture of learning and growth mind-set learning is developed.”

On **technology**, the review appeared to sit on the fence, stating: “we recommend a balanced and critical view of using technology”.

On **uniforms**, the review found there were arguments “for and against” their introduction. However, its comments seemed to be leaning towards favouring this.

The report stated: “A key consideration is in the ‘open’ school sites, particularly in Exeter, where an introduction of a uniform would allow staff to identify quickly who should be present on site and who should not”. There was, however, no discussion here as to whether, as an alternative, these sites might no longer be kept “open”.

In a seemingly leading comment, the review also concluded: “We have no evidence that uniforms reduce children’s ability to express themselves or their identities,” though many countries make do without them. (Your correspondent is agnostic on the issue).

The report, as far as I can see, makes no recommendation on whether the Steiner practice of children calling teachers by their first names should continue.

## The board’s conclusions

The review was advisory. It is, perhaps, in looking at how the findings are to be taken forward by Avanti itself that the contrast with what the report sets out as many parents’ wishes becomes most stark.

(Perhaps the clue as to how this would work out was provided in the sub-heading of the review report itself: “Designing a new Avanti curriculum”. So, full-on Avanti branding, there, and no mention of Steiner).

In a series of **frequently asked questions** on the schools’ websites, Avanti Schools Trust (AST) seems to acknowledge the issues the former Steiner parents care about, before being open enough to publish answers that show how the parental preferences as set out in the report are not being supported.

Phonics will be taught in early years and KS1, states the trust.

Pupils will be required to take part in the phonics screening tests [technically, the government calls them a “check”], from 2021.

Pupils will also be required to take part in KS1 tests from next year.

The schools will use the “language of the national curriculum,” ie key stages and phases, such as the Steiner terms of kindergarten, lower, middle and upper school.

On technology, “each school will...consider the pedagogical rationale for how using tablets or computers improve learning”.

On uniform, there would be “no change to the current uniform requirements in September 2020 but we intend to launch a formal consultation on the possible

September 2020 but we intend to launch a formal consultation on the possible introduction of a uniform in each school from September 2021”.

On whether children would continue to be able to call teachers and other staff by their first name, the answer was “No”. The Q and A doc added: “In line with our other schools we will be asking children not to use first names with teachers and other adults.”

Avanti seems likely to stress the fact that the overall philosophy of its review may lead to curricula at these schools which I guess are towards the more progressive/alternative end of current offerings of England’s state-funded schools.

For example, the review rejects what might be characterised as disciplinarian approaches to behaviour management, stating that “Overtly punitive behaviour management systems, including isolation and detention as a common approach, should be avoided.”

Its suggested “nine domains of learning” include “handcraft”, which is also a central part of the Steiner curriculum, and that “singing should feature as part of every school day”. Yoga and the “Steiner approach to the learning of languages”, which sees a foreign tongue taught from an early age, are also mentioned in the report’s recommended structure.

However, there appears little doubt that the review, and its broad endorsement by the Avanti board, rejected much which was specifically Steiner about these schools. It thus drew a line under the philosophy under which they had been founded.

## Reactions

Parents I have spoken to were aghast. One said: “I think most parents are shell-shocked. It seems there has been no desire to engage genuinely with the Steiner Waldorf philosophy.”

Another told me: “There is little or nothing left of Steiner Waldorf in the new curriculum and you could not even call it Waldorf inspired.

“There will be no opportunity afforded by the [Avanti] trust to give feedback and scrutinise the review or the new curriculum.”

The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship [SWSF] supports Steiner education in the UK and Ireland and has had representation on what is called a “hub board”, which Avanti set up to supervise its three former Steiner schools.

Its executive director Fran Russell said in a statement that SWSF noted that Avanti had not been required by the government to undertake the curriculum review process, and that it was “appreciative of the effort made to seek out the views of parents in the three schools”.

But it added: “Parents are deeply disappointed at the decision not to maintain exemptions to the EYFS [Early Years Foundation Stage] and Key Stage 1 to enable children to continue to start formal learning at age six rather than age four.

“Later formal learning was central to the education offer to the families when they came to the schools. The kindergarten years where young children learn through imitation and play and develop social, emotional and physical capacities before starting formal learning at age six, is a cornerstone of Steiner Waldorf education...

“The decision to introduce formal learning from age four in all three schools and KS1 testing at age seven will mean the dismantling of the kindergartens and a wholesale move to introduce the national curriculum in its entirety.

“As such, a foundation stone of the original establishment of these schools is being removed and the curriculum will bear little relation to Steiner Waldorf education. This is



not something SWSF can support and as a result we have withdrawn from our role on the interim Hub Education Board overseeing the governance of the three schools.

“It has become clear that the option for [Avanti Schools Trust] to apply for exemptions to the Early Years Foundation Stage and KS1 testing was never available because requirements within the funding agreement [with the DfE] prevented it. And we were told the Department for Education had indicated it would not support such exemptions...I have consequently written to the Secretary of State about that decision and its impact on the children and parents.”

The **letter** from Russell to Williamson seems powerful and bears reading in full. It warns that Avanti had indicated it would not be re-applying for exemptions from the early years foundation stage and key stage 1 tests by the time it took over the schools.

“This was diametrically opposed to what the parents in those schools had chosen for their children,” warns the letter.

It then states that “we are told” that the reason that formal literacy and maths teaching was to start in the schools at the age of four, and the kindergartens would be disbanded, was that “the funding agreement issued by your department made it impossible for AST to apply for exemptions to the EYFS and KS1 tests and thereby maintain the practice already established in the school of starting formal learning at age six”.

Citing evidence of the success of the Steiner movement’s one remaining state-funded school in England – Steiner Academy Hereford – and in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and China, the letter adds: “There is no evidence to suggest there is something intrinsically flawed about Steiner education and its specialised curriculum that would justify a decision to deny parents access to it in any form as the education provision of their choice.”

The letter adds: “Parents seek out our schools for the artistic way in which children are taught without stress and high pressure. The availability of this kind of education within the state sector is essential if parental choice is to be genuine especially when the mainstream approach of introducing formal learning at a younger age than most of our counterparts in Europe is considered by many educationalists and parents to be too stressful for a substantial number of children.

“Without the availability of Steiner or Steiner inspired education parents will increasingly turn to home schooling.”

The letter calls on Williamson “to consider these issues as a matter of urgency, explain the decision to effectively deny the possibility of exemptions in the new AST schools and what measures your department will take to accommodate the parental choice of large numbers of parents who seek Steiner education or Steiner inspired education within the state sector”.

I asked Mike Ion of the Avanti Schools Foundation for a reaction but at the time of writing had received no response.

My piece on what I think are the profound implications of this case for how English schools reform under the Conservative-led government should be seen can be read [here](#).

## **Independence of the curriculum review questioned**

Controversy has also bubbled away over exactly how independent the review of the

curriculum at these three schools, commissioned by Avanti, had been.

The inquiry was commissioned by AST and billed as being carried out by a team put together by the University of Cambridge primary school, a free school in the university town. The headteacher is Dr James Biddulph, also led the curriculum review itself.

But as far as I can see the review report does not flag up Biddulph's previous connections to Avanti: he is a former headteacher at Avanti Court primary school in Barkingside, North-east London, and he is also a former director/trustee of the Avanti trust.

Two directors at Avanti, Molly Warrington and its chair, Mike Younger, also have links to the faculty of education at Cambridge, as former academics at the university.

Although the curriculum review is a thoughtful piece of work, and, as SWSF has acknowledged Avanti was under no obligation to have it carried out at all, some parents believe Biddulph's past in particular compromised its independence and may have affected its ability to reach judgments which the trust would not support.

Eyebrows were also raised when Younger wrote, in an email to parents at Avanti Park school in late April – with the review report about to be published – that Biddulph “has not worked in any capacity for the [Avanti] trust”. This left them bemused, given that Biddulph was headteacher at Avanti Court from 2012 to 2014.

The seven-person review team did feature two people from within or close to the Steiner movement, as well as two other University of Cambridge Primary School employees and two advisors/consultants.

I also asked Mike Ion for comment about the review's independence but have yet to receive a reply.

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